

TOLSTOY AN ESSENE."



A SERMON.

Preached by the
Rev. D. WASSERZUG,
at the Dalston Synagogue,
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וְשִׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ הָ' לַעֲשׂוֹת צִדְקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט : Gen. 18. 19

And they shall keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice.

The early chapters of our sacred history record the names of three illustrious men, who, say the Rabbis, mark three important epochs in the moral growth and spiritual evolution of mankind. These were Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. Compared with his generation, Enoch was a shining light of virtue *וַיֵּתְהַלֵּךְ חֲנוּךְ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים*. Nevertheless his goodness was relative only to the standard of his age ; measured by the standard of a later time, he fell short of the highest perfection ; hence *וְאַנְנוּ כִּי לְקַח אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים*, God took him before his time, before the demoralising influences of his age, against which he strove in vain, could prevail against him. A higher stage was reached in the era of Noah. In a world that was filled with violence and corruption, Noah was able to keep himself pure and righteous *נָחָ אִישׁ צָדִיק תְּמִימָה בְּרוֹתִיו*. Nevertheless his righteousness too was relative only to the standard of his age. Compared with his successor, Abraham, he attained but a relatively inferior degree of holiness. *לְפִי דָרוֹן הָיָה צָדִיק וְאַיְלוֹ הָיָה בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל אֶבְרָהָם לֹא הָיָה נָחָשָׁב לְכָלּוֹם*. Abraham it was, whose life exemplified the beau-ideal of moral grandeur, not only to his own generation, but for all time. Abraham lives in the heart of his people as the most perfect type of unswerving faith in God *וְהָאָמֵן בְּיָ'* *וַיַּחַשֵּׁבָה לוֹ זָדָκָה* : It was a faith that upraised his eyes from this lower world, with its purely material pleasures, to the higher pleasures of the divine life. It is a faith too, which, rising to the grandeur of absolute self-surrender in God, has in every generation flamed up in the hearts of men of our race, inspiring them to lives of supreme virtue. Let me take one instance. When after the trials and tribulations of the Maccabean war of inde-

pendence, the nobler spirits among our people began to examine their ways and reflect upon their conduct, they concluded that their national afflictions had been a visitation sent upon them by heaven for their persistent disloyalty to the Law. Hence arose the Pharisees, who determined to separate themselves unto the Lord, and build a fence round the Law. These were distinguished for their fervent religious devotion and pious outlook on life. But zeal, unrestrained and unsupported by sound judgement, has a tendency to fly to the falsehood of extremes. Among these Pharisees was a party who were dissatisfied with the ritual decisions of the Rabbis, which were based on reason and the capabilities of human nature, and sought to tighten the bonds of religious discipline with a rigor that provoked the protests of the ecclesiastical authorities. This party were the Essenes, who declared it to be their mission to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. To effect this, they elaborated a ritual system of the most rigid purity. Among other of their regulations, they discountenanced the use of wine and meat, eschewed marriage, and denounced war even in self-defence. They lived solely by the tilling of the soil, and objected even to cattle-rearing as a pursuit, on the ground that it was opposed to Scriptural precept. They were the forerunners of the ascetics and anchorites, who so powerfully influenced the founders of early Christianity. Starting with the highest ideals, and inspired by the purest motives, they were carried by their blind zeal to the most impossible extremes, and hence completely failed to exert any influence on the religious life of the people. If, however, their influence was insignificant in the sphere of Jewish life, it was far otherwise in the domain of Christian practice. There their teachings and precepts have ruled with inspiring force down to this day.

I am led to these observations by my contemplation of the life of an illustrious personality, who this week has loomed largely in the public eye. Count Leo Tolstoy,

who although not of Jewish blood, had yet much of the old Hebrew fervor, may with perfect justice be called the last of the Essenes. We have only to read his Confessions, in which he described his spiritual conflicts, and finally the religious principles which he arrived at after much mental debate, to realise how close akin were his views to those of the old Jewish order. Innumerable threads of the old mystic teaching of the Essenes are woven into the fabric of his philosophy. Like a second Koheles, Tolstoy started life with every social advantage. He had wealth, rank, power and genius, and every blessing that the world could give. In his younger days he did not hesitate to indulge in every pleasure that life could offer. He gambled, drank, lived loosely and deceived people. There was no crime, he said, that he did not commit, and people approved of his conduct, and considered him, comparatively speaking, a moral man. In his heart of hearts, however, he felt that all was vanity and a vexation of spirit. Illegitimate pleasures were to him what they always are—the dust and bitterness of Dead Sea fruit which crumble in the mouth, the taste of the cup whose draught is poison. In the midst of his giddy career of sensual gratification, the problem was pressing itself upon his mind with ever increasing insistence and force “What is the meaning of life?” Was it the aim of life to acquire wealth and fame? Surely not, for although he possessed both, yet he was thoroughly dissatisfied. Wealth, he saw, was apt to take wings unto itself and fly away, and fame too was infected with the taint of impermanence. He then turned to science for a solution of the riddle, but all science told him was that millions of years ago certain unchanging forces acting upon certain immutable atoms, set up a process of evolution which has gone on ever since Innumerable forms of life have been born, developed, and died away in endless succession. Man is descended from a race of inferior animals, who are now extinct, and he too must eventually perish, like his ancestors before him. Begin-

ning in mud, he is to end in dust, with all his grand spiritual attributes. This was all very interesting, but it did not answer the question that was troubling Tolstoy. All it told him was "How did I come here." What he wanted to know, however, was "What am I here for?" He then turned to the priests of his Church, but he found them hopelessly imprisoned in the net-work of their ancient formulae, from which they neither dared nor cared to extricate themselves. To Tolstoy, moreover, the priests were ruled out for another reason. The greatest and most pernicious evil that he had seen under the sun was war, and yet he found that the priests not only did nothing to prevent war, but that they accompanied the soldiers on their mission of slaughter, and prayed to God to assist them in their work of wholesale murder. He then set himself the task to work out his own scheme of salvation, and basing himself on the teachings of his Church, he formulated a number of religious principles, which are to all intents and purposes, a revival of the doctrines of the ancient Essenes. Starting from the same theological standpoint as the Essenes, he asserted that the fundamental aim of religion was to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. Like them he lifted up his voice in fierce denunciation of war. With them, too, he dreamed of the day when, in the words of the prophet : Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But are we not to take up arms in self-defence? No, answered Tolstoy, we cannot make hatred cease by hatred, we can only make it cease by love. And then he elaborated the doctrine first formulated by the Essenes, "Resist not him that is evil;" a doctrine which is one of the many that the Church owes to the Rabbis. Those who are persecuted, says the Talmud (Sabbath 88b), but do not persecute, who endure contumely without retaliation, are they whom the Lord loveth as when the sun goeth forth in his might. But, continued Tolstoy, if we accept this teaching as a religious principle, we must be prepared to give it a practical application.



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We must forbear to prey upon our fellow-men, even unconsciously. But how can we avoid taking from them which is their due unless we divide and share all our belongings one with another? He is thus driven to the old communistic doctrine, which the Essenes sedulously followed, and Tolstoy too earnestly sought to pursue. He cultivated the simple life with noble self-denial. He utterly renounced the pleasures of the world. He devoted his life, like another Abraham, to the service of the humblest of his fellow-men. Often was he seen assisting a labourer by shouldering his bundle, or handling his wheelbarrow for him. He worked in the fields early and late helping the peasants to gather in their crops.

And finally like the Essenes, he placed in the forefront of his evangel the law of renunciation. It was because men were always setting this law at defiance, that so much misery and crime and vice abounded. In all societies, certain modes and fashions—certain ways of dressing, certain kinds of pictures and entertainments—were tolerated, which would not be tolerated if people recognised that impurity was a sore evil ruining their lives. Being men, and not angels, we cannot help the impure taint in our blood. But we can help it poisoning our ways, and crippling our energies. If we cannot be absolutely pure, we must be as pure as is humanly possible. Here we have the Essene teaching respecting marriage, expressed in the language of modern life,

Against Tolstoy as against the Essenes the same objection must be lodged. His and their noble visions of human possibilities lack the virtue of practicalness. Beautiful as ideals, they overlook the capacities of human nature. It is for this reason that the teaching of the Essenes were regarded with disfavor by the Rabbis.
 אין נורין ניריה על האכזר אלא אם כן רוב הציבור יכולין לעמוד בה:
 We may not impose upon men greater burdens than the majority can bear. It is for this reason, too, that Tolstoy's religious conclusions have failed in their appeal to the conscience of humanity. Grand and noble though they

be, they have proved powerless to inspire. While renunciation is a law of life as true as it is sublime, the communistic principle which he and the Essenes favored, that all should divide and share the property of each, has failed to commend itself to the judgment of men. While purity is an essential condition of the moral life, the celibacy which the Essenes advocated, and the monkish views which Tolstoy entertained, have never succeeded in gaining the world's approval. For teachings which inspire the heart as well as impress the mind, we must look up unto Abraham our father who sought to keep the way of the Lord not only in righteousness but in a spirit of justice to the capabilities of his fellow-men. From across the gulf of 4000 years, the sublime figure of the patriarch still shines to us with his undying message *וְהִיא בָּרֶכֶת* Be a blessing. Lead men up to God, and bring God down to men. Show them that "God's word is not in heaven that thou shouldst say who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it and do it ? But it is very right unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart that thou mayest do it."

